

Israel and the Mediterranean Option

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Zionism sprang up against the background of the rise of nationalism, the spread of secularism and the dominance of Eurocentricity. One of the chief cultural ambitions of the Zionist movement was to create a 'new man' - an idea which made its appearance in the period of the Enlightenment at the end of the 18th Century, at the time of the historic encounter between the Jewish Diaspora and European culture. It was thought that the Jew could be transformed by the adoption of secularism and modernism, and so be made fit to join European society. However, the myth of the 'new Jew' came into being only when the idea of a separate Jewish nationality was accepted and realized in Israel. It was believed that there was an affinity between the people and the land: only in the land of the forefathers, in the east, would the desired change in the image of the Jew come about. Jabotinsky, in the Zionist Congress of 1905, spoke of the "Palestinian personality", and Martin Buber believed in a mystical connection "between the people and the land." The realization of Zionism in Israel linked ideology to geography, history to a spatial identity.

One of the paradoxes of the situation was that, from the 1920s onwards, one of the models for the creation of the 'new Jew' was the Arab. The Arab was seen by some of the Zionists as an exemplar of belongingness, of an existential and natural connection with the land, and he was the antithesis of the stereotype of the exilic Jew. The Jew was weak in body, over-spiritual and physically uprooted, while the Arab was active, independent, authentic and lived in harmony with nature. The east was not only a place of refuge from the Jewish exile in Europe, but also a source of vitality



and a place where the individual and national personality could be renewed.

Zionism was from its early days characterized by a highly ambivalent approach to the east. Theodor Herzl was among those who rejected the eastern option, claiming in his pamphlet *The Jewish State*: "For Europe we will constitute a bulwark against Asia, serving as guardians of culture against barbarism." This approach was contested by some Zionist ideologues, who discerned vital values in the east; thus Ben-Gurion stated (in 1925) that "the significance of Zionism is that we are, once again, becoming an Oriental people."²

The Zionist approach to the east is a particular instance of the orientalist ideology; that is, the way in which the west relates to the eastern region of the Mediterranean³. It is, however, an approach far more complex than the classic European orientalism, since the east is conceived not only as the locus of the ancient history of the Jewish people, but also as the supreme aim of the people's envisaged return to itself. It is the source, it is the cure to the national plight of the Jewish people, in-built in its national identity - but to an equal extent it also represents 'the other', fundamentally exterior to the Zionist Jew and identified as 'there' whether as an alien, even

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² Zalona (1998).

³ Said (1978); Julien (1977).

antagonistic, entity or as the object of an unquenchable aspiration. The increasing lure of the east in the eyes of the 19th Century's European romantics and the prevailing sense among the intelligentsia of the west's decline, together with a yearning for primordial 'true' and 'sound' foundations prompted Jews with Zionist inclinations to see in the east not only the cradle of their national identity or a safe haven, but also a source of values, strength and moral regeneration for their people.

Until the 1930s, Zionists saw in the east an object of longing and desire, a source of power and an opportunity for redemption. At the same time, however, they started out from a position of western arrogance, an attitude of fear and suspicion, which also made them see the east as a threat. In the wake of the 1929 Arab riots, a rift was created between Jews and Arabs and a period of Jewish separatism began, during which all signs of orientalism were suppressed. Since then, the east has been perceived as a political reality, a place of 'otherness', a sort of absence or gap, rather than as an object of identification emanating positive values. Thus, the perception of the east has been tainted by the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The east was and remains foreign to many Israelis - whether to those who wanted to touch it, become a part of it and internalize it, or (all the more so) to those who wanted nothing to do with it. The oriental tradition was never adopted by the Zionist settlers in Eretz-Israel, but was simply a spice in the new national-popular recipe. The pioneering society remained essentially Eurocentric and regarded itself as an extension of European culture and not a product of Mediterranean culture and certainly not of Arab culture. The Jews, like the Europeans, felt culturally superior to the Arabs and saw Middle Eastern culture as backward and inferior in comparison with western culture. With the founding of the state, *mamlachtiut* (statism) became the order of the day, which meant an enormous concentration of power in the hands of the ruling elites. Processes of social standardization began to form a national community, as was reflected in expressions like "the in-gath-

ering of the exiles" and "the fusion of the exiles". In practice, this represented the abandonment of eastern culture in favor of western values and modernity.

The establishment and consolidation of a coherent and distinctive Israeli identity has been a remarkable historical feat. It would have been virtually impossible without the ability to harness such potent 'myths' as the in-gathering of the exiles, the up-building of Zion as a model society, the creation of a new Hebrew of 'Jewish' type and an overarching vision of national redemption.⁴ Even without the devastating blow of the Holocaust and the wall of Arab-Muslim hostility that confronted the new Israeli state, the challenge of constructing a collective identity in Israel would have been formidable. To convert an urban-based diasporic people whose cohesion had already been significantly eroded by cultural assimilation into a 'normal' nation rooted in its own land and with Hebrew as its language was a huge task even under the most optimal set of circumstances. The ideological synthesis of socialist Zionism and the driving myths that shaped Israeli society in its early years reflected many of these imperatives, constraints and challenges. The emphasis on national security, unity, rootedness, pioneering settlement and military virtues as well as the priority attached to a 'melting pot' ideology, seemed appropriate to the immediate imperatives of survival under adverse conditions.

The ideology of the melting-pot and the Zionist concept of the 'new man' later gave way to the old-new idea of a non-ideological Mediterranean melting-pot, blending together immigrants from east and west, from the Christian countries and the Muslim countries. This new identity was not ideologically based, but was formed by geography and culture.

New forms of integral nationalism and religious fundamentalism related to the sanctity of the Land of Israel began to change the contours of the Israeli identity. The balance between the constituent elements of Israeli col-

⁴ Ohana and Wistrick (1995).

lective identity were further affected by the erosion of the dominant Zionist-socialist pioneering ethos in the early 1970s, by the gradual rise in influence of Israel's underprivileged Sephardim who helped bring the Likud to power in 1977, by growing settlement across the green line and violent confrontation with Palestinians in the territories and by the sharpening divisions between the religious and secular segments of Israeli society. The decline in the internal national consensus and the increasingly harsh criticism and condemnation of Israeli policies abroad were two of the most obvious symptoms of malaise in the 1970s and 1980s. Inevitably, they too began to change the contours of Israeli identity, the focus of its collective consciousness and memory and the perception of Israel's role in the world. This was the context in which the Zionist ideology itself came to be called into question from within and the older nation-building myths, which had already lost much of their mobilizing power, were challenged. Israel's international isolation and the successive traumas of the Lebanon War, the Intifada and the unaccustomed Israeli passivity during the Gulf War provided important external stimuli for this fundamental debate about the place of Israel in the region and its geo-political orientation.

With the progress of the peace process the southern shores of the Mediterranean are now open for Israel to pursue cultural relations with the entire Mediterranean Basin. It is time now to explore the concept of a Mediterranean culture by comparing images, symbols and myths of Mediterranean societies and by searching for whatever is shared or different in various cultural arenas. The Mediterranean links three continents, three religions and thousands of years of civilization. Throughout history the Mediterranean has been the conduit for reciprocal influences and cultural exchanges, and these processes have always affected Jews and Israelis. As Israel is emerging from its isolation in its immediate cultural environment, the cultural identities of the Israelis need to be re-thought. Through the exploration of Mediterranean Culture and the place of Israel in it, the Israelis also hope

to be able to gain an insight into the various elements that make up their own culture.

The Mediterranean option is not a call for ethnic isolation or a return to roots, but for an Israeli ethos which would constitute a common cultural platform for the discussion of tensions and separate identities. It is too ancient, important and central to be one more reason for ethnic denial, for the nursing of sectorial interests, folkloristic tendencies or sentimental longings.

The Mediterranean is not the Levant. It is the Levant as well as other things. The Mediterranean includes both the Levant and the west, and out of this synthesis it created the European space and western culture. The Mediterranean did not give rise to a hegemonic, all-inclusive culture with a single, homogeneous character. It created a variety of historical models of cultural meetings and exchanges of intellectual goods, such as the Italian Renaissance or Christian-Muslim-Jewish Andalusia. In the words of the French historian Fernand Braudel: "To sail in the Mediterranean is to discover the Greek world in Lebanon, prehistory in Sardinia, the cities of Greece in Sicily, the Arab presence in Spain and Turkish Islam in Yugoslavia"⁵

It is true that, from the 1960s onwards, hotels were built on the neglected shores of the Mediterranean, concealing it from the view of the inhabitants of Tel Aviv. For many years, there was a feeling that the Mediterranean identity had been laid aside, that it was an option that had been passed over. The Jewish Israelis had a suspicious and hostile attitude to the sea, perhaps because they had been urbanized in the countries of exile (there was no sea in the Polish *shtetl* or the Atlas Mountains), perhaps because it symbolized wandering or perhaps because the Israelis had an ethos of conquest of land.

The feminist essayist Jacqueline Kahanoff, a Jewish immigrant from Egypt, had insights on the Levant and the Mediterranean which

⁵ Braudel (1985, 1994)

were ahead of their time.⁶ Levantinism, which developed in the Eastern Mediterranean, was not in her opinion "a new craving for monolithic unity which denies all differences", but a phenomenon that originated

"in places where there is an interaction between cultures-where there can be a flowering, where there can be amorphousness, but there must be interaction. Just as there are experiments in genetic hybridization, so one must experiment with synthesizing cultures in order to create one that is living and successful. This will obviously not arise out of stagnation and rigid cultural polarities. If there is to be any relationship between ourselves and our neighbors, it will come about through the Levantine cultures."

Levantinism represents a culture with an independent existence, a culture in the process of formation, the configuration, which will result after many years from the encounter of Europe and the east. With the decline of colonialism, the idea began to take the form of a genuinely new culture. As Kahanoff wrote:

"I am a typical Levantine, inasmuch as I give equal value to what I have received from my Eastern origins and what I have now inherited from Western culture. I see this cross-fertilization called Levantinization in Israel as an enrichment and not an impoverishment!"

From many different sides, people began to envisage the goal of developing and disseminating a cultural policy and regional strategy for the Mediterranean Basin, in order to produce the cultural content for understanding between the various peoples and states of the entire Basin, and of its eastern end in particular. Many voices in Israel society began to seek to strengthen the Middle East peace process by creating cultural understanding among the states of the Mediterranean Basin and destroying barriers between peoples. Thus the Mediterranean option is not only a creative and innovative proposal, but also an aspect of regional cultural dialogue in its own right.

Why should we speak about dialogue, pluralism and tolerance between peoples in general and between Jews and Arabs, specifically in the Mediterranean context?

The historian Shlomo Dov Goitein claimed that the Jews were a Mediterranean people, open, free, mobile, not shut up in their corner of Southern Asia but dwelling in the countries which had inherited the classical culture and assimilated it into the Islamic culture.⁷ In his monumental five-volume study entitled *A Mediterranean Society* Goitein described a mediaeval Jewish society living within a Mediterranean geographical and cultural framework. The unity of the Mediterranean area is also the starting point for Fernand Braudel and Henri Pirenne. Braudel believed that similar natural and climatic conditions throughout the Mediterranean Basin produced a basic Mediterranean civilization. Pirenne stressed the emergence of Islam as the main cause of the split of the former Latin Europe into two parts: a larger part concentrated on the shores of the Muslim countries and a smaller part which was Christian.⁸

Why do we have to mention the dark side, the "shadow" to use Albert Memmi's term, that lies over the Mediterranean Sea?⁹ Because it is necessary to try and avoid a tendency towards sentimentalism and *kitsch*, and because an effective debate about tolerance and pluralism can be significant only where they do not exist.

It must be possible to mould a new regional culture, in which the stress would be on awareness of the role and importance of the other as part of the inter-regional fabric. The Mediterranean Basin is a mosaic of interlocking influences; it has been the most important region of cultural, artistic and religious cross-fertilization in the world. The consequences of these influences and collaborations are manifest in all its sub-regions and countries. The Mediterranean as a whole

⁶ Kahanoff (1978)

⁷ Goitein (1960).

⁸ Sivan (1968).

⁹ A. Memmi: "La tête à l'ombre, in: Notre Méditerranée", *le Point*, special issue (15 August 1998), p. 86.

comprises centers of multifaceted contact; trade routes and markets, in which commercial and cultural dialogue have flourished for thousands of years. In our own days, however, this vital dialogue has not found an appropriate expression.

My basic assumption is that cultural ties can lay the groundwork for and lead to long-term political relationships. The most outstanding example is German-French relations in the period after World War II, when de Gaulle and Adenauer recognized the importance of mutual cultural relations for political understanding between the two countries. The 1995 Barcelona Declaration reaffirms "that dialogue and respect between cultures and religions are necessary precondition for bringing peoples closer."¹⁰

Because the Middle East is perceived as a political rather than a cultural milieu, and because political dialogue is much more effective when preceded by cultural and sociological discourse, the Israelis need to look for partners - and, if they do not exist, to create them among social and cultural actors and institutions, in order to conduct this cultural discourse. This is one of the classic roles of civil society: to promote collaboration among institutions and create common themes and messages based on shared problems and interests.

What really is a 'civil society'? It is not simply a case of all the citizens forming a political community, nor is it, as is frequently said, merely 'public opinion'. What we describe as 'civil society' is the meeting of the autonomous subjects of the state and its institutions, united not only by values and cultures but also by the desire to act together and to assume specific responsibilities in projects of general interests. So 'civil society' is the sum total of voluntary associations, local communities, cultural and research institutions, representative bodies in the private enterprise and business sectors. Civil society, both by

its attitudes and its actions, must support governments in their struggle against the common enemy: radicalism and extremism. Furthermore it has to do so with its own instruments: dialogue, tolerance and moderation.¹¹

The Oslo Accords created a revolutionary opening for dialogue. They were based, in principle and in fact, on two parallel channels: the immediate bilateral channel which focuses on resolving the disputes of the past and ending the state of war between Israel and its Arab neighbors, and the multilateral channel which provides a basis for and strengthens the bilateral channel by creating a safety net along with other factors, developing common interest and coping with common problems. These common problems - water, economic growth, disarmament and environmental issues - cannot be solved by one side alone or even in concert with our next-door neighbors, but only on a broad regional basis.

Building on the interdependence of the bilateral and the multilateral channels, we must develop the next phase and move ahead from Oslo to Barcelona: promoting the 'Mediterranean option' on the level of civil society rather than among governments. As such it can create a reservoir of common interests among peoples and especially among the civil societies of the region. The recognition of common interests and resolution of common problems, which can be accomplished only on a regional basis, must proceed at a pace and with a critical mass that assure its immediate visibility in the field. It is imperative that the nations of the region replace the perceptions of animosity and distrust with a new climate of cordial relations that reinforces the collective hope for peace.

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¹¹ Taylor (1990); shils (1991); Walzer (1991).

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